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HARTY'S ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE:
A CONFLUENCE OF WAGNER AND ELGAR

Jeremy Dibble

Acquaintance with the public figure of Hamilton Harty first took place in a *Musical Times* article about him in 1920. An Ulsterman, an autodidact, who had established his career without ever setting foot in a musical establishment, he was already a seasoned musician with twenty years of accompanying, composing and conducting behind him and a man well known in Britain's thriving circle of performers. Of course, in Ireland, and to a significant extent in Britain, Harty was closely connected with the Irish cultural revival. He had cut his teeth as a composer and accompanist with the Feis Ceoil, he was a close friend of the successful Irish tenor, John McCormack, and his creative prowess had culminated in winning the Feis's second 'symphony' prize in 1904, for a work that incorporated Irish folksong into all four movements of the symphonic architecture. What is more, the first performance of the work, in Dublin with the semi-professional Dublin Orchestral Society, gave Harty his very first opportunity as a conductor. Harty's 'Irish' Symphony owed much to the template of both Stanford's 'Irish' Symphony and Esposito's prize-winning 'Irish' Symphony for the 1902 Feis in that Irish melodies formed a recognisable and intrinsic focus of the musical edifice. However, one of the most interesting facets of Harty's emerging musical language, around 1904, was his uninhibited assimilation of continental styles. Unfettered by, and perhaps even unaware of, the bifurcated

opposition of Brahms and Wagner within the Austro-German world of symphonic music, he took as much as he wanted from both, and was equally happy to incorporate the colour and élan of Tchaikovsky and Dvořák where it suited him. It was this brand in particular, of nineteenth-century Romanticism, inflected by a degree of folksong modality, that characterised Harty's stylistic eclectic formation and which is evident from his earliest orchestral work *The Exile* of 1902.

From the interview he gave to the *Musical Times* editor, H. C. Colles, we know that he had already begun to venerate Berlioz, a composer for whom he retained a lifelong devotion both spiritually and promotionally, and whose music he promoted unquenchably with the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester. In Manchester. Harty also did much to cement the centuries-old relationship between the British public and Handel, whose orchestral works he rearranged for romantic orchestra to great acclaim. Indeed, for many years the names of Handel and Harty were inseparable. Harty was also a great exponent of Brahms at a time when the composer, oft considered a conservative, still caused a degree of puzzlement among the critical fraternity if not the public, and, towards the end of his career, in the 1930s, a superior interpreter of both Elgar and Delius. Yet, we often overlook the fact that Harty remained a fervent Wagnerian. Although, as he admitted himself, he placed Berlioz and Mozart above Wagner, he was always an enthusiastic admirer. To some extent this admiration became obscured through his later criticism of opera and particularly of Wagner's paradigm of 'music drama' which he considered was equally if not more effective in the concert hall rather than the theatre. Yet it is

evident not only from his conducting activities but also from his most fertile period of composition before the First World War that Wagner's musical language had been profoundly assimilated. While this may be evident in such works as *The Exile* and the 'Irish' Symphony, Harty's most Wagnerian essay is his setting of Keats's transcendental poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, an extended vocal monologue written for his wife, the greatest English Wagnerian soprano of her day, Agnes Nicholls. What is more, the creation of Harty's work appears to have come about not only through the agency of Nicholls's Wagnerian reputation but also, and perhaps more unexpectedly, through the catalyst of Elgar's fourth (and thoroughly Wagnerian) oratorio, *The Kingdom*, completed and first performed in 1906 (the year before Harty's work was composed) and written specifically with Nicholls's substantial vocal instrument in mind.

How early Harty became acquainted with Wagner's music is uncertain. His cultured father, the much acclaimed organist of Hillsborough Church, William Harty, may well have had scores in his legendary home library. But if the young Herbert Harty (as he was then known) did not gain an introduction there, then it was undoubtedly through Michele Esposito in Dublin that he developed his first knowledge. Esposito had been a devoted Wagnerian since his Parisian days in the 1880s and rarely did a season of the Dublin Orchestral Society pass without at least one entire programme devoted to excerpts from *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*,

Die Meistersinger, *Tristan*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *Parsifal*.¹ Harty's experience of the DOS was not long. He joined in or around 1899, not long after the organisation was founded, but left in 1901 when he decided to move to London for wider opportunities. But by the time he returned to Dublin to give the first performance of his 'Irish' Symphony, he had already assimilated much of Wagner's harmonic and contrapuntal methods, a fact evident in the climax of the of the expositional phase of the first movement. Here one can detect the application of chromatic voice-leading learned from *Tristan*, and the emotional peak of the upwards phrases is undoubtedly borrowed from the first phraseological arc of the *Tristan* prelude (Example 1). *Tristan*, significantly, would remain one of Harty's most favoured operatic works – one he would conduct in the theatre as well as concert extracts for the Hallé in Manchester.

But, one suspects, it was not until the twenty-four-year-old Harty met the soprano Agnes Nicholls in 1903, first in the capacity as an accompanist, that Wagner began to loom large in his life. Nicholls had been a star pupil at the Royal College of Music under Albert Visetti and such was the early maturity of her voice that she learned to sing the 'Liebestod' from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* as a student under Stanford's direction. She sang Dido in Stanford's pioneering revival of Purcell's opera in 1895 and as Anne Page in the first English-language production of Verdi's *Falstaff* in 1897. These were substantial roles which soon led to her securing professional contracts at Covent Garden, the first being as the Dew Fairy in

¹ See Dibble, J., *Michele Esposito* (Field Day: Dublin, 2010), 88.

Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* in 1901. In the years that followed, Nicholls went from strength to strength. In 1904, she and Harty married, a *cause célèbre* in itself, and the two became well known as a duo, giving song recitals, often both performing from memory.² She firmly established herself as a leading soprano in Britain and was well known as an exponent of oratorio, taking on major roles in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Bruckner's *Te Deum*, Verdi's *Requiem* and native works by Parry, Stanford and Elgar. Dubbed by Henry Wood as 'a great artist gifted with a lovely voice',³ she was especially known at Britain's major choral festivals, at the Three Choirs, Birmingham, Leeds and Norwich, and was particularly closely associated with Elgar's rise to fame and the major oratorical works he produced for the Birmingham Festivals, namely *The Dream of Gerontius*, *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*. In 1906 at the Birmingham Festival, the role of the Virgin Mary in the first performance of *The Kingdom*, a work that contained some of the composer's most haunting music in 'The sun goeth down'; this role she virtually made her own over the next few years. Besides concert performances of *Elijah*, *Israel in Egypt* and *Hiawatha*, her operatic career remained busy with the role of Venus in *Tannhäuser* and Richter, who placed great faith in Nicholls' ability as a Wagnerian soprano, insisted that she sing Woglinde in *Das Rheingold* and one of the parts of the Valkyries in *Die Walküre* during the Covent Garden production of *The Ring* in 1906. Nicholls had spent much time in Europe during her time as a student at the RCM, and, after leaving the

² See Dibble, J., *Hamilton Harty: Musical Polymath* (Boydell & Brewer: Woodbridge, 2013), 34.

³ Wood, H., *My Life of Music* (Victor Gollancz Ltd: London, 1938), 327.

College, she had also visited opera houses in Prague, Vienna, Dresden, Munich and Berlin (though she never visited Bayreuth on account of its prohibitive cost). This acclimatized her to the style of German singing but, at the same time, she entertained serious doubts that she could achieve the same manner of delivery. Yet, as Nicholls explained, Richter thought otherwise:

I always feel I owe much to the help and encouragement of Dr Hans Richter. He liked my voice and my work, but after hearing so much opera in Germany, I came to the conclusion I could not attempt Wagner. I could not do it in the German fashion. About this time, Dr Richter was giving many excerpts from the “Ring of the Nibelung”, in concert form and he asked me to do some for him. I told him my reasons for not doing it, but he over-ruled my objection, by telling me that Wagner had always wanted things *sung*, and as he knew him well, I imagine he was right, so I began to think about it.⁴

During the course of 1907, Nicholls sang more and more Wagner. Under Leopold Reichwein she continued to appear in *Die Walküre* and *Lohengrin*, and *Tannhäuser* under Franz Schalk, all at Covent Garden; and in these instances it was noted how her powers as an actress were also maturing.⁵ At Queen’s Hall she sang the role of Brünnhilde in the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung* but was clearly suffering from influenza.⁶ The climax of 1907 was undoubtedly Richter’s two *Ring* cycles at the Royal Opera, but Nicholls was also greatly in demand at the Gloucester Three Choirs, Cardiff and Leeds Festivals, though Stanford was disappointed when Nicholls was indisposed for his new *Stabat Mater* whose soprano role had been specifically conceived for her. In 1908 she was again much in demand for roles in

⁴ Nicholls, 25.

⁵ *The Times*, 15 February 1907.

⁶ *The Times*, 22 January 1907.

Elijah, *The Kingdom*, *Messiah* and less familiar works such as Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* and Parry's *Judith*, but all eyes were on the first production in English of *The Ring* under Richter at Covent Garden. 'I am going to sing next week at the opera after all,' she wrote with some elation to Harty, 'Sieglinde in the Walküre'.⁷ She also played Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*.⁸ The reception after the first act of *Die Walküre* was jubilant, as Nicholls remembered over fifty years later:

When we were back in our dressing rooms there suddenly came a knock on my door, and when the dresser opened it, lo and behold there was Richter standing there with Percy Pitt. They had come to congratulate us. I could hardly believe it. It seemed incredible that such a great man as Richter should come to us to do that. I was greatly touched, and it always remains in my memory as a very moving incident.⁹

Nicholls continued to sing Wagner throughout the rest of her career. She toured with the Quinlan Opera Company during its tour of Australia in 1912, made regular appearances at Covent Garden and was a principal singer with the British National Opera Company under Thomas Beecham. Yet, ultimately, Nicholls' first doubts about her voice's suitability for Wagner remained. 'It will probably be said', she concluded, 'that all the roles don't "lie" well for my voice, and my readings set at defiance the accepted traditions. It is all quite true, but at that time, there was no one else able to do it all in quite the same way with my experience of the stage.'¹⁰ As the years passed, she continued to sing the role of Elisabeth but, as she confessed during

⁷ Letter from Agnes Nicholls to Harty, 29 May 1908, *GB-Lam McCann Collection* 2006.212.

⁸ 'I believe,' Nicholls wrote later, 'I am correct in saying I was the first Englishwoman to play Brunhilde throughout "The Ring."' See 'Nicholls, 25.

⁹ *Radio Times*, 3 October 1957.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the war, 'I can't bear to do Brunhilde, and have escaped from her now! She is too heavy for my voice...'¹¹

Nicholls made a number of gramophone recordings between around 1909 and 1921 but no interpretations of Wagner have survived. Yet, to give some idea of just how commanding Nicholls was as a Wagnerian soprano, acquaintance with the demanding roles she sang as Judith in Parry's eponymous oratorio, and even more notably in Elgar's choral works gives reveals a vivid account of her stamina, control and range. Elgar first became familiar with Nicholls's voice at a performance of his *Coronation Ode* at the Sheffield Festival in 1902, but it was in his oratorio, *The Kingdom*, written for Birmingham in 1906, that he conceived his most extended and demanding solo scene, 'The Sun Goeth Down', for her voice.¹² She became a specialist of the piece and Elgar was always keen to recruit her for performances of the work as well as take advice on matters of phrasing and breathing. In an interview for the BBC on 12 May 1957, Alec Robertson interviewed the ageing Agnes Nicholls about her connection with Elgar's work. Nicholls recalled:

I think it was 1906 that I knew I was engaged for the forthcoming new production of *The Kingdom* at the Birmingham Festival. The proof score came in two parts, and I remember we were staying in Devon at the village of Combe Martin. I had been swimming in the morning and it was not till after lunch that we went through the part, and came upon a wonderful solo, "The Sun Goeth Down". After we had gone through it twice my husband turned from the piano and said, "You know, that is exactly you, for your voice and what you can do best." I was thrilled. I worked at it until it literally got into my blood. The first rehearsal was in London, and Edward

¹¹ Letter from Agnes Nicholls to Captain Talbot-Rice, 8 July 1918, *BG-Lam*, McCann Collection, 2006.214.

¹² Northrop Moore, J., *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1984), 502. Elgar later also requested Nicholls for the recording of his music to the *Starlight Express* in 1916.

Elgar seemed very moved. The next rehearsal was the final one in the Town Hall, Birmingham. John Coates was the tenor, and I remember he came over to me on the platform, tears in his eyes, to say how beautiful it was.¹³

Elgar had the same response at the rehearsal. At Birmingham the experience of singing *The Kingdom* was enhanced by performing *The Apostles* the day before. For Nicholls the performance of these two large-scale works - effectively *opéra-manquées* - was enormously draining: 'Oh, afterwards I was literally exhausted, but it wasn't so much the singing. I think it really was the melodies of both *The Kingdom* and *The Apostles* - we had done *The Apostles* the night before - had simply overwhelmed me; they never went out of my head. I couldn't sleep at all.'¹⁴

In 'The Sun Goeth Down', a substantial nocturnal soliloquy from the second part of what is arguably Elgar's finest oratorio, Mary sings words from the Psalms (104, 63 and 42) as well as the Acts of the Apostles, in a retrospective account of the Crucifixion, a moving nocturnal elegy on the death of Jesus in the form of a tripartite 'scena'. Just as in the manner of Wotan's lengthy monologues in *The Ring* where Wagner took the opportunity to recall past crucial dramatic events, thereby bringing about the chance to recapitulate key thematic ideas within the larger symphonic structure, Elgar follows the same model in this extended scena for Mary by employing the scena as substantial reprise of events and their associated leitmotives in *The Apostles* and, at the same time, using the entire recapitulatory device as a finale to Part IV of the oratorio. Elgar's techniques also draws from Wagner's fluid,

¹³ BBC Interview, 12 May 1957; also transcribed as 'The Fifteenth Variation: A Portrait of Elgar', *The Elgar Journal*, Vol. 15 No. 3 (November 2007), 38.

¹⁴ Ibid.

non-periodic declamatory manner for the voice in which, through the tessellated matrix of leitmotives, the orchestra is ultimately the prime contrapuntal agency. While 'The Sun Goeth Down' is very much a 'set piece', its continuity depends entirely on its symphonic, developmental momentum. Tied to this is the sense of sheer effort and stamina demanded of the voice, and here Nicholls' robust physique was clearly intended for the demands Elgar made, initially in the outer nocturnal, lyrical sections, but also in the central climactic where the voice's rapturous top B flat signals not only the arrival of the relative key (E flat) but the symbolic culmination of Christ's 'Beatitudes' and Peter's 'faith' motive (See Example 2). Such a high, ecstatic moment (redolent of Wagner's 'Liebestod') would be important to Harty's own vocal scena for his wife a year later.

Nicholls's Edwardian years of singing Wagner and Elgar marked the apogee of her career as an operatic soprano and, fresh from the success she had enjoyed with the scene from Elgar's oratorio, Harty recognized this implicitly both in her performances of Wagner and her sensation-causing performance of 'The Sun Goeth Down' in 1906 by composing for (and dedicating to) her his one major extended solo vocal work for soprano and orchestra, a setting of Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* for the Cardiff Festival of 1907. The choice of Keats's poem, one that held iconic status in the canon of English literature of the time, was almost certainly a deliberate attempt to find a vernacular text which expressed something akin to the sentiments and philosophy of Wagnerian music drama, in particular *Tristan und Isolde*, for which Nicholls had a major reputation in the closing 'Liebestod'. Keats's ode encompassed

many of those elements seminal to Wagner's diffusion of Schopenhauer and the Tristan legend: the escape from reality, the state of deep imagination (in poetry) and forgetfulness, the longing for death, the (drugged) paralysis of the pastoral dream, ecstasy in the nightingale's song (in place of the standard romantic agency of opium), the warmth of night and dread of day, only for all of this mental transcendence to be shattered by the return to reality and the passing of an imagined world.

Given the obvious parallels of Keats's symbol of the nightingale with Schopenhauer's belief in music as the ultimate escape from the evil and suffering caused by man's Will, and, moreover, Keats's profound conviction that the profoundest truths about the human condition lay in poetry rather than science – one which chimed with Schopenhauer's view that art provided essential knowledge of the world's objects in a way that is more profound than science or everyday experience – it is not surprising that Harty, a perceptive reader of literature, should have settled on such a nineteenth-century poem, one, incidentally, which was very much contemporary with Schopenhauer's publication, in 1819, of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Representation*).

In the same manner as Elgar in his oratorios, Harty drew on the full panoply of Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian apparatus to create his extended monologue or scena. The vocal delivery moves freely and inventively between free recitative, arioso and full lyrical set piece, while the orchestra, in true Wagnerian fashion, acts as the symphonic background and means of organic cohesion. Indeed, Harty's

ambitious and masterly orchestration not only provides the key means of unity in the work, but is vividly illustrative of mood; moreover, his dexterous orchestral technique aids the careful and colourful delineation of leitmotives which also assists the symphonic construction of the larger structure. In this sense Harty fully understood Wagner's polyphonic methods of handling leitmotive. His matrix of musical ideas shows a fertile variety of 'types' (i.e. some are tonally stable, while others are open-ended, transitional or modulatory) which, collectively, creates a seamless, forward-moving *Gestalt*, whilst individual ideas retain a distinctive and descriptive power. This, for instance, can be observed in the closed idea ('longing' - Example 3a) of the prelude and coda (Stanza 8), exclusively for orchestra, the open-ended bridge passage ('shadows' - Example 3b),¹⁵ the more chromatic recovery from this idea together with its thematic suffix ('drug-induced numbness' - Example 3c) based on a tonic pedal, and the transitional Bacchanalian material (Stanzas 2 and 4 - Example 3d) and which is consistently associated with tonal change. Furthermore, the malleability of these ideas is enhanced by a comprehensive incorporation of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century chromatic harmony and key symbolism, executed with Harty's particular individual thumbprints (see Table).

The musical structure that Harty brings to the eight stanzas of Keats's ode is adroitly conceived. Germane to the scheme are part of Stanza 4 (from 'Already with thee! tender is the night') and the whole of Stanza 5 which, for the composer,

¹⁵ Significantly this ambivalent harmony, its constituent notes based on the *Tristan* chord, are treated by Harty as either VII⁷ of V (of C major) or II^{7b} of the mediant (E minor) throughout the work, falling operatively between two tonal areas already prevalent in the preludial and postlude material.

encapsulate all those facets of the poem which allude to an 'out-of-self' state of ecstasy and a transcendence over life and death. For this Harty created a set piece 'Notturmo' in C major (the key also symbolic of the 'longing' expressed in the first stanza), analogous to a *Liebestod* for Nicholls (Example 5), in which, just as in the finale to Act III of Wagner's music drama, the lyrical aspect of the soprano soloist is given free and euphoric rein. The heady, indeed ecstatic, nature of this section is portrayed not only by the richly melodious component but the way Harty organically extends his material first to B flat major ('I cannot see what flowers are at my feet') and then to E major, all increasingly embellished by polyphonic orchestral filigree. The effect of this passage which concludes on a dominant pedal of E, replete with a euphoric top B for the soprano (the highest point so far in the work) and an impressive orchestral surge, is to throw into marked relief the denial of cadential resolution to E, and, in its place the unexpected yet rapturous return of C and a restatement of the 'out-of self' material (Example 6). Such treatment of the voice was surely conceived with the role of Isolde in mind, but of even greater contemporaneous significance must have been the climactic apex of Elgar's scene in *The Kingdom*.

The frame around this set piece is strongly suggestive of sonata organization. The first three stanzas defining an expositional phase in which the Prelude and Stanza 1 are couched in C major, while a second group of markedly contrasting ideas is articulated by the 'Bacchanale' in Stanzas 2, 3 and the first part of Stanza 4, fluid in its tonal behaviour, but framing a central 'Lament' in F sharp minor. In turn, the

recapitulation and coda are firmly grounded in C major. Stanza 7, though it corresponds with the transitional properties of Stanza 2 (even to the point where E flat plays a prominent part in proceedings), is nevertheless an entirely recomposed paragraph which gravitates to the dominant of C. At this juncture, with the initial return of C minor (rather than major), an elegiac closure is announced where the narrator of the poem becomes aware of worldly reality. An interesting feature, too, of Harty's preparatory passage of declamation ('The same that oft times hath Charm'd magic casements'), is the strong, unabashed allusion to the 'prayer' motive from Elgar's *The Apostles* (and subsequently used by Peter in *The Kingdom*), one which, given Harty's familiarity with the scores of both Elgar's oratorios, may well have been a gesture of tribute (see Examples 7a and 7b). The final stanza, which invokes the orchestral prelude (see Example 3a), is highly effective, for here the orchestra becomes notably articulate in its expression of the narrator's mournful demeanour. Even though the soprano has one more climactic cry of anguish on a top C ('As she is famed to do, deceiving elf'), which no doubt suited Nicholls' considerable range (and stamina), the last six valedictory lines of the final stanza are charged with a deeply affecting melancholy as the nightingale's 'plaintive anthem fades'. Here, too, adroitly, Harty recalls the 'shadows' motive, this time manipulating its ambivalent functional properties as a substitute secondary dominant of V. The C major of the opening is thus infected with the memory of a past elation, and yet the sparse texture conveys a despondency at the breaking of the spell ('Fled is that music – do I wake or sleep?') which is accentuated by the final prolongation of the tonic

key. Moreover, as a final gesture of thematic, poetical and timbral unity, Harty reminds us of the lingering 'ache' in the juxtaposition of the two low flutes, a sonority used at the opening of Stanza 1, and the full, sonorous orchestra.

The *Ode to a Nightingale* was given its first performance at the opening concert at Cardiff on 25 September 1907 with Nicholls (who had already sung in Sullivan's *Golden Legend*) and Harty conducting. The reception was enthusiastic; 'the gifted pair received every mark of approval in the unstinted applause bestowed upon their combined efforts.'¹⁶ After the performance, Elgar, who had been present at the rehearsal, wrote to Harty in praise of the 'exquisite' orchestration.¹⁷ Harty replied: 'I am very grateful to you for writing so kindly about my "Nightingale" and you encourage me greatly. It was particularly good of you to hear the rehearsal and I would like to tell you how much I value your words of praise. Please accept my best thanks with best greetings from us both.'¹⁸ Soon afterwards Wood seized the opportunity to conduct the work at the last night of his Promenade Concerts at Queen's Hall on 26 October and Harty and Nicholls were then given the chance to perform it together again at the Crystal Palace with the British Symphony Orchestra on 30 November. Nicholls then sang it for a fourth time with the Hallé Orchestra under Richter on 5 December.

Harty's *Ode to a Nightingale* cemented the strong association he had with Wagner's and the same musical rhetoric was to appear again in such striking

¹⁶ MT, xlviii (November 1907), 726.

¹⁷ BBC talk, 1951.

¹⁸ Letter from Harty to Elgar, 21 September 1907, Elgar Birthplace Museum.

openings as his tone poem *With the Wild Geese* of 1910 and even more so in the baritone monologue of his setting of Whitman's *The Mystic Trumpeter* written for the Leeds Festival of 1913. It is also conspicuous, albeit more fully assimilated, in his late symphonic essay, *The Children of Lir*, completed in 1938, much of which, however, was composed many years earlier. Nevertheless, for all his love of Wagner and his clear indebtedness to the language and gesture of Wagner's music dramas, Harty disliked Wagner and much other opera on the stage. Though he conducted *Tristan* and *Die Walküre* in the theatre, as well as staple works such as *Carmen* and *I Pagliacci*, Harty increasingly expressed an antipathy towards its success as an art form. At first this seemed contrary to his prospects and aspirations. In 1913 he was contracted by the impresario, Raymond Rôze, to conduct *Carmen* and *Tristan* at Covent Garden, and this led in turn to his contacting the Irish writer, Padraic Colum, with the idea of writing an opera based on the fifteenth-century tragedy of the Galway Lynch family. With the outbreak of the First World War, this came to nothing. What is clear, however, is that Harty wished to base his operatic design *not* on Wagnerian psychological dramaturgy but on the colour and *action* of *Carmen*. This he explained to Colum:

On the other hand, colour and action are so necessary to a good opera that I took the liberty of changing the scene and detail for my own purposes. The most successful opera from all standpoints ever written is "Carmen" – and there is not a page in which in which this constant change of colour and feeling does not give the composer his great chance. For the same reason – much of the great Wagnerian dramas are hopeless and must eventually fail – Picturesque staging and a swift changing action interest not only the audience but the composer.¹⁹

¹⁹ Letter from Harty to Colum, 19 October 1913, US-NYp Berg Collection.

Sir Thomas Beecham once explained that he had offered Harty an important position in the Beecham Opera Company but recognized that the Irishman's 'interests and inclinations were entirely with the symphony orchestra.'²⁰ In fact by the time the First World War was over, Harty was openly critical of opera's artistic possibilities. In an interview for the *MT* in 1920 he commented, in characteristically bald terms, that opera held a limited attraction for him. Given his wife's major achievements on the stage, it represented a surprising and major divergence in their interests, especially in the 1920s when Nicholls was a prominent force in supporting the British National Opera Company:

Opera seems to me a form of art in which clumsy attempts are made at defining the indefinable suggestions of music. Or else one in which the author of a plot and his actors are hampered by the music which prolongs their gestures and action to absurdity and obscures the sense of their words. The sound apologia for opera is on the lines that it induces into listening to music many people who are not musical enough to listen to love it for its own sake without the accessories of operatic acting and operatic scenery – such as they are! Is it possible today not to see that Wagner deluded himself when he thought he was making a new and supreme art harmony out of half a dozen arts? When we hear Wagnerian opera we put up with a lot – for the sake of the music. Who for instance wants actually to see Isolda waving her scarf in signal to Tristan? The music is telling us of that, and also of the fluttering of Isolda's heart. The action here is as superfluous as that objectionable habit of some people at concerts when they start humming on recognizing a favourite theme. Sometimes Wagner's staginess tends to make ridiculous scenes which, left to the music, would be amply significant. Take, for instance, that supper-party in Hunding's hut (first Act of "The Valkyrie"). The music tells us that the two Volsungs are stealing enraptured glances each from other. But the Bayreuth tradition also insists that the actors shall stare transfixedly, and stare they always do in the most aggressive way, though under Hunding's very nose. The apprehensive and throbbing music has told us of their feelings and of Hunding's suspicion. But the behaviour of the actors is always such as more than to confirm any suspicion, and

²⁰ Kennedy, M., *The Hallé Tradition: A Century of Music* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1960), 202.

you feel that Hunding would be more than justified in turning the stranger out into the storm straightaway.

Operatic scenery affects me similarly. The Prelude to Act 3 of “Tristan” has painted the sea so well that it is always a descent to be shown the scenic artist’s attempt at it a minute or two later. The subject might be run to earth in those operas where music is at its most grandiose, and the scene precipitates itself from the merely banal into something near the grotesque. The last scene of “The Twilight of the Gods” is a classic example.²¹

Harty held this view all his life. In 1926, when it was suggested that the Manchester audiences lacked perception or sufficient musicality because the city did not have regular opera or a bespoke opera house, he was equally contentious in his letter to the *Manchester Guardian*. Just as before, Wagner was the focus of his argument:

Many people take the attitude that if Manchester will not support opera it must be that her citizens are not sufficiently musical. Is this a justifiable conclusion? Sometimes I wonder if the lack of support is not caused by a precisely opposite reason. From a strictly musical point of view a good deal of opera music sounds better on the concert platform than in the theatre. This is especially true as regards Wagner. One reason is that the ordinary English theatre is not constructed in such a way as to provide sufficient room for a large orchestra such as is required, for instance, in the operas of Wagner and Strauss. And then a good many people feel that, if music is beautiful in itself, it is worth devoting all one’s attention to it without being distracted by action on the stage and make-believe scenery, which are, after all, only very clumsy expedients to translate what the music itself conveys perfectly to those of whom I speak. There are many people who derive more pleasure from reading Shakespeare’s plays than from seeing them acted, but it would be absurd to say that because of this they do not appreciate his genius; and in the same way it is unfair to hint, as I have heard hinted, that because the people in this city did not crowd the recent opera performances of the B[ritish] N[ational] O[pera] Company it is a reflection on their musical intelligence.²²

And in 1927, when Beecham was attempting to set up his so-called ‘Imperial League of Opera’, Harty, who was interviewed on the subject, reiterated his dislike of the

²¹ ‘Hamilton Harty’, *MT*, lxi (April, 1920), 229.

²² Letter from Harty to *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 February 1926.

idiom: 'Personally...I am not particularly interested in opera, as I think it is an unsuccessful fusion of two or more arts, and I shall always think so.'²³

Harty remained largely true to this conviction, though he was always happy to direct concert performances of opera. Moreover, Wagner nights for the Hallé remained *de rigueur* and not a single one of Harty's concert series between 1920 and 1933 passed without a concert *exclusively* of Wagner's music, performances which, incidentally, drew approbation from the press. In addition, Harty's Wagner nights brought to Manchester the world's best Wagnerian singers, including Nicholls and the Australian soprano Florence Austral, and a testimony to these collaborations are a broad range of extant recordings made in the 1920s and 1930s of Wagner and other operatic composers.

As for Elgar, Harty remained a keen proponent of the composer's music, especially in the later part of his career as conductor of the Hallé Orchestra in the 1930s and during his brief time with the LSO when he became a keen advocate of the symphonies. Though he rarely conducted Elgar's oratorios, he was nevertheless responsible for reviving *The Kingdom* in Manchester in March 1928, twenty-one years after it has first been heard in the city in 1907, though by this time Nicholls had retired from singing and the role of Mary was sung by Dorothy Silkes. Nicholls had, however, retained a close connection with the role until shortly before her retirement. Indeed, in 1924, her participation in a performance of *The Kingdom* at the Hereford Three Choirs Festival under Elgar's baton saved the day. As Adrian Boult,

²³ MG, 15 November 1927.

who was present at the performance, recounted in a letter to Michael Kennedy (and in several later articles and radio broadcasts):

It was a rather terrible festival. [Percy] Hull [organist of Hereford Cathedral] wanted a change of personnel (not himself of course) and imported a lot of Covent Garden people who one by one threw their hands in. I believe it was Austral who was to sing *The Kingdom*!!! Of course she defaulted (it may have been someone else equally impossible) and A.[gnes] N.[icholls] was pressed into service, *I think*, well after she had retired because she began singing a bit out of tune. Afterwards she said, 'The Pentecost choir were badly out of tune and I saw that E.[dward] E.[lgar] had lost his temper & it got worse & worse & faster & faster and when "The sin goeth down" came I wondered if I could do anything, but I shut my book and I shut my eyes and prayed - and it happened.' It was extraordinary how vividly I remember Willie's [William Reed's] instant response to her dedication. Almost at once the orchestra followed with a sort of change of colour and finally E. E. decided to join in and the performance flowed from then to the finish...²⁴

Such was Nicholl's attachment to the part that she had the power to transform a performance, even in the twilight of her career. Harty collaborated with Nicholls on many occasions and, in particular, the 'Liebestod' from *Tristan* was a recurrent item in their repertoire, not least in the concerts they gave with the London Symphony Orchestra at Sir Stanley Cochrane's concert hall at Woodbrook near Bray in 1913 and 1914. Nicholls also figured among the soloists at Manchester until around the mid-1920s when she finally gave up her singing career. In time, the Manchester soprano, Isobel Baillie became Harty's new 'nightingale' and sang the ode on several occasions under the composer's direction.

During Harty's lifetime, the *Ode to a Nightingale* remained a largely neglected work. Harty himself seemed to prefer to promote his most conspicuously Irish

²⁴ Letter from Adrian Boult to Michael Kennedy, 22 June 1976, op. cit. in Kennedy, M., *Adrian Boult* (Hamish Hamilton: London, 1987), 99.

works - his 'Irish' Symphony (in its various revisions), *With the Wild Geese* and his arrangement of the 'Londonderry Air', and, in his last years, *The Children of Lir*, a work singularly focused on his Irish legend, served to emphasise his Ulster heritage. Yet the *Ode* was composed at a particularly formative period of Harty's career. Its pages reveal a potent and thorough assimilation of the music, harmony and techniques of Wagner whose influence on the young Ulsterman has largely been ignored, perhaps because Harty was himself so critical of Wagner's music dramas in later life. This criticism has largely obscured our willingness to acknowledge that he was deeply receptive to Wagner's scores (and especially to that of *Tristan*) an indebtedness of which a study of the *Ode* provides a rewarding confirmation. However, Harty's undoubted Wagnerian fervour also requires the perspective of two other essential factors - his collaboration with Agnes Nicholls, arguably the greatest English Wagnerian soprano of her era, the composition of Elgar's *The Kingdom* and the role of Mary whose Wagnerian manner was conceived especially for Nicholl's voice and stature. The *Ode to a Nightingale* is a unique sum of these parts and represents a culmination of Harty's fascination for the most advanced forms of German symphonic and dramatic music of the time and a work in which his most continental voice is to be heard. Nevertheless, the *Ode* was also a significant product of Harty's immersion in the rich maelstrom of Edwardian British and Irish music. In this context, it also represents one of the most substantial and intricate early indigenous twentieth-century solo scenas in terms of its eclectic vision, brilliant orchestral technique and vocal demands. Rivalling works of a similar length, such as

Parry's *Soldier's Tent* (1900), Delius's *Cynara* (1907, though not brought forward until 1929), Bax's *Adonais* 1912) and Cecil Coles' *Fra Giacomo* (1914), the *Ode to a Nightingale* merits reappraisal for its modern, pioneering vision, but, perhaps equally importantly, it should be considered one of the most imaginative and noteworthy works in Harty's output.

Text	Thematic and Tonal Treatment
<p>Stanza 1</p> <p>My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk: 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, But being too happy in thine happiness, That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees, In some melodious plot Of beechen green, and shadows numberless, Singest of summer in full-throated ease.</p>	<p>Prelude (Exposition) C major 'Longing' (a) 'Shadows' (c)</p> <p>Recit. (First Group)</p> <p>'Drowsy numbness' (c) Arioso</p>
<p>Stanza 2</p> <p>O for a draught of vintage! that hath been Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd earth, Tasting of Flora and the country-green, Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth! O for a beaker full of the warm South! Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene, With beaded bubbles winking at the brim, And purple-stainèd mouth; That I might drink, and leave the world unseen, And with thee fade away into the forest dim:</p>	<p>Bacchanale (second group)</p> <p>A flat major</p> <p>C major E flat major 'Hypnotic draught' (d)</p> <p>[Soprano: high B flat]</p>
<p>Stanza 3</p> <p>Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget What thou among the leaves hast never known, The weariness, the fever, and the fret Here, where men sit and hear each other groan; Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs, Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies; Where but to think is to be full of sorrow And leaden-eyed despairs; Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.</p>	<p>Tonal transition</p> <p>F sharp minor: Lament 'weariness'</p>
<p>Stanza 4</p> <p>Away! away! for I will fly to thee, Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, But on the viewless wings of Poesy, Though the dull brain perplexes and retards: Already with thee! tender is the night, And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays But here there is no light, Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.</p>	<p>A major: reprise of Bacchanale</p> <p>C major (Nocturne) (e)</p>

<p>Stanza 5</p> <p>I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs, But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet Wherewith the seasonable month endows The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild; White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine; Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves; And mid-May's eldest child, The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine, The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.</p>	<p>Extension of (e)</p> <p>V of E C major: Reprise of (e) —</p>
<p>Stanza 6</p> <p>Darkling I listen; and, for many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death, Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme, To take into the air my quiet breath; Now more than ever seems it rich to die, To cease upon the midnight with no pain, While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad In such an ecstasy! Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— To thy high requiem become a sod.</p>	<p>C major: Reprise of Recit. Stanza 1 (Recapitulation)</p> <p>'Drowsy numbness' (c)</p> <p>Emphatic cadence into C major</p>
<p>Stanza 7</p> <p>Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird! No hungry generations tread thee down; The voice I hear this passing night was heard In ancient days by emperor and clown: Perhaps the self-same song that found a path Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, She stood in tears amid the alien corn; The same that ofttimes hath Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.</p>	<p>Transition</p> <p>Tonally fluid</p> <p>C minor: [Elgar quotation] V of C</p>
<p>Stanza 8</p> <p>Forlorn! the very word is like a bell To toll me back from thee to my sole self! Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well As she is fated to do, deceiving elf. Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades Past the near meadows, over the still stream, Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep In the next valley-glades: Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?</p>	<p>Coda</p> <p>C major: Reprise of Prelude: 'Longing' —</p>